

Genesis 29

God's School Of Discipleship

We call the last command of Jesus to His disciples "The Great Commission. In it He says, *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*. He didn't just say spread the Good News about salvation and forgiveness in My name, He specifically gave the order to make disciples.

The word "disciple" is used 259 times the New Testament is the translation of a word which comes from the verb *manthano*. *Manthano* means "to learn." A disciple is one who learns from a teacher.

Interestingly, our English words "disciple" and "discipline" are closely related. They come from the same root. To learn takes discipline. We even call subjects of learning "disciplines."

Not only that but biblical discipline in the sense of punishment is designed to be remedial. In other words it's designed to teach. It's designed to change behavior. When parents discipline their kids, if they're doing it for the right reason, they're doing it to direct them. When God disciplines us, it isn't because we've annoyed Him. It's to produce character and maturity in our lives. Discipline and discipleship are really two sides to the same coin.

Now today we have all kinds of Bible studies and books to help us in the discipleship process. But along the way we need to ask ourselves an important question. How does our Heavenly Father carry out discipleship?

What methods does He use in our lives? How does God discipline or disciple His children?

That is such an important question because if we misunderstand what God is doing in our lives, we'll totally miss the discipleship that He's seeking to provide us.

God wants to teach us how to live for Him. God wants to shape us and mold us so that we begin to exhibit the character qualities of Jesus in our lives. For most of us that's a pretty big challenge. Well He does that, many times, through the circumstances of our lives.

Our study of the book of Genesis has, for the last 16 chapters, centered on the lives

of 3 individuals; Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob. These men are the patriarchs, or the fathers, of Israel and ultimately of Jesus Christ Himself.

In the case of Abraham and Isaac, God worked through his truth and the events of their lives to bring them to a place of having a mature faith.

At times that process has been painful. At times these men failed God, but God was even able to use their failures in the total process of discipling them.

As we pick up today in chapter 29 we find ourselves about to enter the second major chapter, or phase of Jacob's life.

Turn to Genesis 29 page 27

There is no doubt that God wants us to learn from the life of Jacob. He's definitely not a minor character in God's program. His life covers just a little under half of the book of Genesis! In his successes and in his failures, I think there are all kinds of touch points where we can all identify very closely with this man.

In that first major portion of Jacob's life we saw him as a believer in God and yet a man with a weak faith. He showed a lot more spiritual perception than his brother Esau, but in the end bowed to his mother's wishes and deceived his aging father.

Because of the hostility of Esau against him and because of his father's concern that he not marry a Canaanite woman, Jacob then leaves for Haran.

In chapter 28 we saw how God appeared to Jacob at Bethel and how that experience changed his life.

He was discouraged, everything had seemed to fall apart at home. He was out on his own on a long, dangerous journey. But God confirmed His commitment to, and love for Jacob. And Jacob left with a new sense of God's care for him.

In chapters 29 & 30 we have the study of Jacob's time in Haran.

This is some of the toughest time that Jacob ever has to experience. For 20 years he is cheated and exploited by his Uncle Laban. But something else was going on in those

20 years. Jacob was being disciplined by God. God was teaching him some vital lessons.

We are so impatient. We want God to work things out for us immediately. But I hope, as we're going through Genesis here, that you're beginning to grab onto the fact that God can take decades to accomplish His purposes in us and yet, His timing is always right.

These were going to be some painful lessons, but they were necessary for Jacob to learn, and interestingly God uses ungodly Laban as a big part of the teaching process.

I. God Can Disciple Us Through The Most Unlikely People

Read verse 1

Haran was located on one of the Northern tributaries of the Euphrates River, at the top of the fertile crescent which connected Mesopotamia with Canaan.

Abraham, many years before this, had been told by God to leave his family and his homeland and go out to Canaan. Instead he took his father and got as far as Haran and stayed there awhile. Eventually his father died and Abraham moved on, but some of his other relatives stayed.

It was back here that Abraham had sent his servant to find Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, Jacob's father. Now Jacob was making the 450 mile journey himself. I would have to believe he dragged his feet the first day as he left home under such oppressive circumstances. But after the life transforming encounter with God at Bethel, Chapter 29 verse 1 says literally in Hebrew, "Jacob lifted up his feet."

He got moving and he came to the land of the people of the East.

Read verse 2 & 3

As he arrived, he saw a familiar sight.

There was a wayside well with several flocks of sheep lying around and a group of shepherds lounging in the shade. Now these weren't meek and mild shepherds like we often see on Christmas cards, these were rugged guys, used to living in the

outdoors and fighting off wild animals and thieves. They would have eyed this approaching stranger with guarded curiosity.

At Bethel Jacob had learned what God is like, at Haran he was to learn what man is like. Up until now, Jacob had always been the big man, the son of a wealthy influential chief, a man with many servants to care for him.

Now it was different. Now he was the outsider, the stranger trying to make a way for himself among men who had no use for him at all.

In verse 4 Jacob gives kind of a friendly shout out to these guys.

Read verses 4 & 5

Everybody knew Laban. He was rich, he was powerful and he was the biggest crook in town. He was proud, greedy, jealous, untrustworthy, a liar, and a self-righteous trickster.

Laban is also Jacob's uncle, the brother of his mother Rebekah. That's why Jacob asks for him. Jacob really knows very little about him at this point, but he is going to find out soon enough.

Read verses 6 - 11

When Jacob hears that Laban's daughter is coming, he has to get the other shepherds moving, probably so he can meet Rachel alone.

They don't budge though, so Jacob, uncovers the well, waters Rachel's flock, kisses her and then cries out and weeps.

I'm sure all of this amazed the other shepherds, but it must have been Rachel who was the most surprised.

A lot of people interpret this as Jacob falling in love with Rachel at first sight, but I'm not so sure that's the case.

You will notice there in verse 10 that 3 times we find the phrase "Laban, his mother's brother." It wasn't just Rachel that Jacob was thinking about. He often times heard

his mother speak of Laban her brother and Jacob was looking to Laban for help in finding a wife and a way to make a living for a while until he could safely return home.

Now, you say "Well, I don't know, the guy ran up and kisses her, that sure looks like love at first sight!"

This wasn't a kiss of personal love. That wouldn't have been done in public. This was a kiss of greeting. But even that kind of kiss was only practiced by relatives or close friends, so it must have startled Rachel. She was probably even more shocked when she saw this grown man begin to weep and cry with a loud voice.

Well, finally Jacob managed to control his emotions long enough to tell her who he was.

Read verse 12 (thru "son")

He was her cousin, the son of her Father's sister. How many times had Rachel heard from her father about the beautiful Rebekah, who had left home so long ago, under remarkable circumstances. She'd always wondered what had happened to her.

Now it was Rachel's turn to be emotional.

Read the rest of 12 *So she ran and told her father.*

And verses 13 - 14

Notice how Laban hurried out to meet his nephew. I'm sure he was interested in hearing news about his sister again. She had left at a moments notice and he hadn't seen her in years, but Laban had something else on his mind too.

The last time anyone had come from his family in Canaan he cashed in. He was given gold and riches. Now his mind was probably filled with visions of gold and jewels. Laban knew Jacob was from a very wealthy family so he gave him a royal welcome.

Jacob was industrious and wanted to make himself useful to Laban, so he soon began to help him with the family business, caring for the flocks.

I'm sure that Jacob carefully refrained from mentioning that part of his reason for

being there was to keep away from his brother Esau. Instead he probably talked about the beauty of his mother and the success of his father. All the time Laban was sizing up this nephew of his and devising a plan to take advantage of him.

Read verse 15 - 19

Because of working for Laban, Jacob was constantly in contact with Rachel, and his love for her began to grow. He soon knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that this was the woman he wanted for his wife.

When Laban offered him wages, Jacob immediately proposed that Rachel would be worth 7 years of labor. That would allow him to marry the girl of his dreams and to give some time for Esau to cool off before going home.

Laban had found that Jacob was a good worker. He also knew that Jacob was in line to inherit a sizeable amount of wealth. So he came up with a plan to keep him around.

Rachel, Laban's youngest daughter, was beautiful of form and appearance. The Hebrew literally says, "She was shapely and good looking."

Leah, his older daughter, had something wrong with her eyes. The Hebrew literally says she was "tender eyed." Maybe she was near-sighted, or didn't have dark lustrous eyes like Rachel. We don't know for sure, but we do know that Jacob only had eyes for Rachel.

By the way, if their names give any indication of their appearance *Leah* in Hebrew means "Wild Cow" (H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*) *Rachel* means "Little Lamb."

It was obvious that Jacob loved Rachel and so Laban agreed to the bargain.

Read verses 20 & 21

When those 7 long years of waiting were up Jacob asked for his wife. When verse 20 says "They seemed like a few days to him," I don't think that meant the actual waiting time itself. Really, the love which he had for her would make the time drag by slowly, not fly by rapidly.

I think verse 20 is referring to the actual bargain itself.

It would be like Laban had said “You give me \$10,000 dowry money as proof of your financial competence and you can marry my daughter” and Jacob saying “That's like pennies to me because of my great love for her.”

Jacob was the one who suggested the 7 years. To us that is a long time. To Jacob, Rebekah was of such value that it was like working a few days for her. There was definitely love between Jacob and Rachel.

Now Laban put his plan into action.

Read verses 22 - 30

It was the custom to have a festival week after a wedding, beginning with a banquet on the first night. At the proper time, when the wedding formalities had been observed, Laban presented his daughter to Jacob as his wife.

The problem was it wasn't the “little lamb” but the “wild cow” that was sleeping beside him when Jacob woke up the next morning.

Needless to say Jacob was fuming. He was now legally married to Leah, like it or not. The deceiving Jacob, had been deceived by Laban.

So Laban says, “The first born always gets married first in our country, so you fulfill your marriage week with her and then you can marry Rachel, too. Of course, you'll have to work for me for another 7 years to pay off her dowery.”

Now, looking at this from a 21st century western viewpoint, we'd say, “That's impossible. How could Laban pull a fast one like that and Jacob not know. Rachel was the girl he'd loved for 7 years now. How could he have not known the difference?”

There are 2 reasons why Jacob didn't know.

1. The oriental marriage customs of modesty, veils, the darkness of the marriage chambers and the heavy perfume. 2. Laban's feast.

There's at least 6 Hebrew words translated as “feast” in the Old Testament. The one that was used in verse 22 to describe the festivities before Jacob went into his wife is

mishteh in Hebrew and it comes from the verb *shathah* which means “to drink.” (Translated “drink” or “drunk” 192 times in the Old Testament.)

It's the same word used in Esther to describe King Ahasuerus' drinking party. The stress of the word is on the drinking side, and even though the word can be used to apply to a regular banquet, I think here the context shows us this was a party with lots of wine and strong drink.

Laban had the whole thing planned out. Jacob had been deceived. Now he had two wives, one which he loved and one which he didn't. Plus he was indebted to Laban for another 7 years.

What in the world was going on? Actually it would be another 13 years before Jacob could get away. I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt God was doing something in Jacob's life.

Ultimately it wasn't Rebekah or Isaac who sent Jacob to Laban, it was God.

All of this wasn't just by chance. God was discipling Jacob by his circumstances. Laban was a chisel in God's hand to work on Jacob's personality and character. He had important lessons to learn. Painful lessons to learn.

Back in his home country Jacob had refused to submit to God. He was now compelled to submit to a human being. He had to serve, not dominate. Jacob was younger at home, but he had dominated others, so God taught him by allowing him to go to Laban where he would be dominated.

Earlier Jacob hadn't respected the rights of the first born. He schemed to get the blessing away from Esau. Now, by the cunning of Laban, Jacob had to submit to the rights of the firstborn, in having to take Leah as his wife.

Sin as well as righteousness bears consequences. Jacob had acted in unbelief. God had promised him the birthright. It didn't look like God was going to be able to bring His promise to pass.

So Jacob manipulated and schemed and deceived to bring it on himself. God is showing the consequences of doubt and unbelief.

God holds us responsible for our actions. Jacob could have blamed his mother for pushing him into the trickery. He could have blamed his father for refusing to do God's will in blessing him. He could have blamed Esau for despising his birthright. He could have blamed his circumstances. He could have blamed God for putting him to the test.

And listen. Everyone of those are true. Those things were all true. His family did let him down, his circumstances did put pressure on him, God was testing him.

But none of those things changed the fact that Jacob was responsible for his own actions.

God holds us responsible when we sin against Him. We can come up with all the good excuses in the world to justify our disobedience and unbelief but God holds us accountable.

Jacob didn't know what it meant to wait on God to fulfill His promises. Now he had waited 7 years only to discover he had married the wrong woman.

I would imagine when Jacob discovered the deception that he was fuming. I'm sure he was angry and bitter, both with Laban and Leah.

But now quickly he must have been struck with the irony of this situation and how it paralleled to the deception he had played on Isaac and Esau. Isaac had thought Jacob was Esau and so he gave him the blessing. Now Jacob thought that Leah was Rachel and had taken her to be his wife. Jacob had been sure that the end justified the means, now he found out how wrong he was.

John Phillips writes about this incident and says: "Jacob reaped just what he had sowed. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

God has a way of putting Labans at strategically placed spots in our lives. It might be at work, it might be in our own homes, it may be in our school. We get frustrated. We think they are a pain in the neck. We wonder, "Why me? Why do I have to put up with this annoying person?" And all the while God has placed us in their path to put the pressure on us. To refine us and to get rid of the impurities in our lives. To speak to us and cause us to see our lives as they really are.

Now listen to this carefully so you don't get the wrong idea. God didn't cause Laban to sinfully deceive Jacob, but He sure used him.

In all there are 3 phases of Jacob's discipling under Laban. The total is 20 years.

In the first 7 years he gains 2 wives

In the second 7 years Jacob gains 11 children

In the last 6 years Jacob gains great wealth

We're not going to take the time this morning to read through the next 29 verses which describe the time in which his wives and their servant girls bear Jacob 11 children, you can read that on your own. But, as you do you'll find a story of jealousy, fighting and bitterness in Jacob's life.

And I believe that is because God was still at work.

I. God Can Disciple Us Through The Most Unlikely People

II. God Can Disciple Us Through The Consequences Of Our Own Actions

Jacob was reaping what he had sown and learning some hard, painful lessons along the way.

God never intended men to practice polygamy. That's obvious from Genesis 2. From the very beginning God's plan was one man and one woman who became one flesh.

And God never intended Jacob to do it either. Jacob should have realized that this whole situation with Rachel and Leah was an instant replay of what happened with his father Isaac.

God determined that Jacob should receive the blessing even though his father wanted to give it to his brother Esau. Jacob used trickery to get the blessing from his father and when it was done and he was discovered Isaac conceded that God's purpose had been fulfilled and confirmed the blessing. Isaac didn't try to bless Esau too. He realized God was accomplishing His purposes.

I believe that God determined that Jacob should marry Leah even though Jacob wanted to marry Rachel. (Leah bears Judah. Jesus was from the Tribe of Judah!) Laban used trickery to cause Jacob to marry her (just like Jacob used trickery on his father) but Jacob didn't concede that God's purpose had been fulfilled and he went ahead and married Rachel and was forced to serve Laban another 7 years.

And for those 7 years and for the rest of his life he reaped the results of his lack of faith through the envy and the strife and the division of his family.

God disciplined and disciplined Jacob.

God calls us to live by faith. That life of faith begins with an understanding of salvation. All through the Bible God calls people to recognize this essential truth, that He alone is the Savior.

For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:3)

I, even I, am the LORD, And besides Me there is no Savior. (Isaiah 43:11)

You shall know that I, the LORD, am your Savior And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. (Isaiah 60:16)

I am the LORD your God Ever since the land of Egypt, And you shall know no God but Me; For there is no Savior besides Me. (Hosea 13:4)

If you're out swimming and get cramps and start to go down you need a savior. You don't need some one to throw you a book on Three Easy Lessons To Learn To Swim. You don't need some one to jump in and say, "Watch me. Just do the Australian Crawl and you'll be back to shore in no time."

You need someone who is going to do what you're unable to do.

That's what God our Savior did for us in Jesus Christ. *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*
(I Corinthians 15:3)

God paid the price of that which condemns us to hell so that we might be delivered. Our response is faith in Him.

Then, once we trust Jesus Christ as Savior God wants us to live by faith. And a life of faith doesn't scheme, make devious plans, and say the end justifies the means. A life of faith, listens as God speaks. Jacob didn't do that.

And so God used the circumstances of his life to speak to him. Not to beat him down, but to get his attention. God used the pain of Laban and the pain of his own family to say to him, "Jacob I want you to live a life of faith where you'll trust me, and listen as I speak. I want you to experience the joy and freedom that comes from

being my disciple.”

Maybe your circumstances are distressing and difficult today. If they’re not now you can be sure eventually they will be. If you’re God's child listen. He is speaking. He is teaching you to be a Christ-like disciple of His.